



What is psychotherapy?

Freud once described psychotherapy as the “impossible profession.” To those who have not experienced it, psychotherapy can sound like a curious, mysterious, complex or even frightening endeavour.

Using brief and simplistic explanations such as “talking to someone about your problems” to describe psychotherapy does not do it justice. At its best, psychotherapy is a process of looking at all aspects of an individual’s life in its depth and entirety.

What makes a person who they are?

Good psychotherapists are curious about what makes a person who they are, which begins with child development and the formation of personality structures and an individual’s past history of attachment to significant others and transgenerational influences. Additionally, psychotherapists take into account the historical, cultural, social and political influences in an individual’s life. These can include, for example, gender, age, disability, sexuality, cultural norms, their present situation and resources. All of these elements have an impact on how someone both views and processes the issues they bring to therapy.

Finally, much of what is communicated in the therapy room is communicated non-verbally, through facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. This isn’t to say that we, as therapists, scrutinise every detail of how someone presents. It is more about being genuinely curious about who the individual sitting in front of us is, and how they interact with those around them, so that they themselves begin sharing in this curiosity.

How does this lead to change?

Profound change in psychotherapy happens at different levels. At one level, it’s vital that we begin talking about what is troubling us with a curious and understanding other. This reduces isolation and helps us feel heard and validated. It is common for some of the symptoms to begin subsiding at this stage, and to experience a sense of relief. Another common response is for thoughts and feelings to surface more frequently, and this can lead to discomfort in the short term.

At this point, it is important to begin making sense of what we are experiencing. While it feels good to be heard, it is also necessary to skilfully sort through the chaos and uncertainty that can be generated by unprocessed feelings.

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Alongside this, we will assess how past and present experiences are linked. For instance, does this situation bring up familiar feelings from the past? In dealing with this situation, what resources are available to you and what beliefs and values are hindering you? Where do these unhelpful influences come from? Throughout psychotherapy, we look at both conscious and unconscious influences in a person's life. Some of the ways to explore those are through dialogue, associations, insight and dreams.

Next, we explore how to separate internalised unhelpful beliefs from current reality. Here, we draw on your internal resources, exploring the patterns repeat themselves in your life, and how to create a different way of being in the world. This process sounds more simplistic than it actually is, as some of our ways of being in the world are deeply ingrained and take time to shift. Plus, some are survival strategies which we have developed very early on and served us in getting through life, for better or worse.

Psychotherapy is a long-term endeavour because human beings are rich with complexity. This complexity can take time to unravel and transform. For long-term, sustainable change, there are no short cuts and quick fixes.

This just a taste of what psychotherapy can be. However, therapy is always led by what the individual (or group, family or couple) presents, and what they want to achieve. Getting there is a joint piece of work grounded in a solid working alliance between client and therapist.

If you are curious to find out more about how psychotherapy can be helpful to you, please get in touch with us at Brighton and Hove Psychotherapy.

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